



N.J.'s toxic|time bombs

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By NICOLA M. WHITE

EAST RUTHERFORD - Operators of chemical plants should prepare for terrorist attacks by beefing up security and using fewer toxic materials, U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine said here Monday.

Corzine, D-Summit, has introduced a bill to improve security and enhance safety in chemical facilities nationwide, drawing specific attention to his home state, where 127chemical plants and oil refineries dot the landscape.

"New Jersey's many chemical facilities are part of the state's industrial fabric and have helped build our economic strength," said Corzine. "But the chemicals found at these businesses pose potentially grave risks to their workers and the communities that surround them."

The senator spoke in the shadow of East Rutherford's Matheson Tri-Gascompany, a sprawling complex on Paterson Plank Road. In 1999, the Environmental Protection Agency required plants to submit risk management plans to prepare for chemical accidents. At the time, the report revealed that in a worst case scenario, an explosion at the plant would emit 100,000 pounds of potentially toxic hydrogen chloride gas.

Given the borough's proximity to downtown Manhattan, a gas plume could affect 7.3 million people in a 14-mile radius, Corzine said.

Since Sept. 11, the company has stopped manufacturing the compound there, said David Wald, the senator's director of communications.

"Certainly any enhancement in security, especially with a facility like Matheson Gas, would be welcomed," said East Rutherford Mayor James Cassella, who added that even under normal circumstances, incidents at the plant have caused concern for the residents of his borough. "Now, with the heightened alert of this area and certainly the United States, any help in that would be welcomed."

The Senate's Environmental and Public Works Committee, of which Corzine is a member, is scheduled to take up the senator's bill on Thursday.

Corzine's bill calls for plants to assess how to use safer technology and improve security. A July 14 New York Daily News report found lax security at metropolitan area chemical facilities.

The bill has the backing of several environmental groups, who emphasized the need for chemical facilities to use safer storage and less-volatile, dangerous

chemicals.

"The benefit is not just homeland security, it's making our communities safer," said Sierra Club Director Jeff Tittel.

Within 18 months of the bill's enactment, each "high-priority" facility would have to conduct a vulnerability assessment; analyze ways to employ safer technologies and less hazardous chemicals; analyze options to enhance security; and implement the most effective plans identified in the initial analysis.

Corzine is opposed to the part of President George Bush's homeland security proposals that would make chemical plants exempt from Freedom of Information Act requests, Wald said.

"You can't hide these plants. Everybody knows where they are," Wald said. "What needs to be done is make them secure and manufacturing their products more safely."

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